

Philosophers: Great Men?

Dominic Tweedie, Communist University, January 2004, re-written 2012

In the history of ideas it not immediately clear whether they have been developed by society, or by a few great men. Let us assume at first that the philosophers listed overleaf can stand as representatives of the various changes and improvements that have happened in the historical, recorded past of human society.

At the top of the list is **Homer**, who wrote 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey' in about 800 BC. He is included because it is Homer the Greek who marks the beginning of the recorded dialogue of secular ideas.

There are Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indian, and Chinese writings of earlier dates. But these are chronicles, mostly of a religious nature. In the secular literature that starts with Homer, people are represented as having in most respects to live their lives according to their own lights, deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. From Homer's time onward there is a developing literary dialogue between thinkers, and between generations of thinkers. It is this line of dialogue between writers down the next 2,700 years of human development, which eventually produces **Marx** and **Engels** in the 1840s.

Marx studied ancient history and philosophy and could read Greek and Latin easily. The Greeks' thinking was more-or-less humanistic, in other words human-centred, like Marxism is. Some of the Greeks, but not all, were materialists, like **Democritus**. Others, like Plato, were absolute idealists. A split between materialists and idealists was already manifest among these ancient Greeks.

Aristotle was a pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great, who united Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan, and northern India, leaving "Hellenistic" literary culture there. Aristotle was systematic and scientific in the modern sense. His work is still useful today, especially in the field of the arts.

To represent Roman thought I have included three personalities from the revolutionary century which ended in the formation of the Roman Empire by Octavian (Emperor Augustus), an event usually dated at 31 BC. The Gracchus brothers, Tiberius and Gaius ("**the Gracchi**") were elected 'Tribune of the People' in 133 and 123 BC respectively, campaigning against unemployment and landlessness. Each was killed during the further class struggles that followed. The politician and philosopher **Cicero** was another Roman of the same era (born 106, died 43 BC).

The Roman Empire in the west in its later revolutionary 'decline and fall' (476 AD) changed from a slave-based metropolitan economy to a rural, feudal one. This was the time of the rise of Christianity to a hierarchical and dominant position in Europe and North Africa. **Saint Augustine**, from Hippo in what is now Algeria, lived from 354 to 430 AD and wrote a great number of books, including 'City of God'.

Saint Benedict (480-543) brought the monastic movement into Europe from North Africa. The huge economic and land-holding movement of Benedictine monasteries is the precursor of the modern business corporation. St. Benedict's 'Rule', a constitution for monasteries, gave shape to this movement.

During the later part of the feudal period a group of philosophers existed (mostly within the holy orders of the Catholic Church) known as the scholastics, or 'schoolmen'. One of them was **William of Occam**, who said: 'It is idle to do with more, what can be done with less', a principle known as 'Occam's razor'. Another was **St. Thomas Aquinas**, who tried to prove the existence of God by the argument of 'causality'.

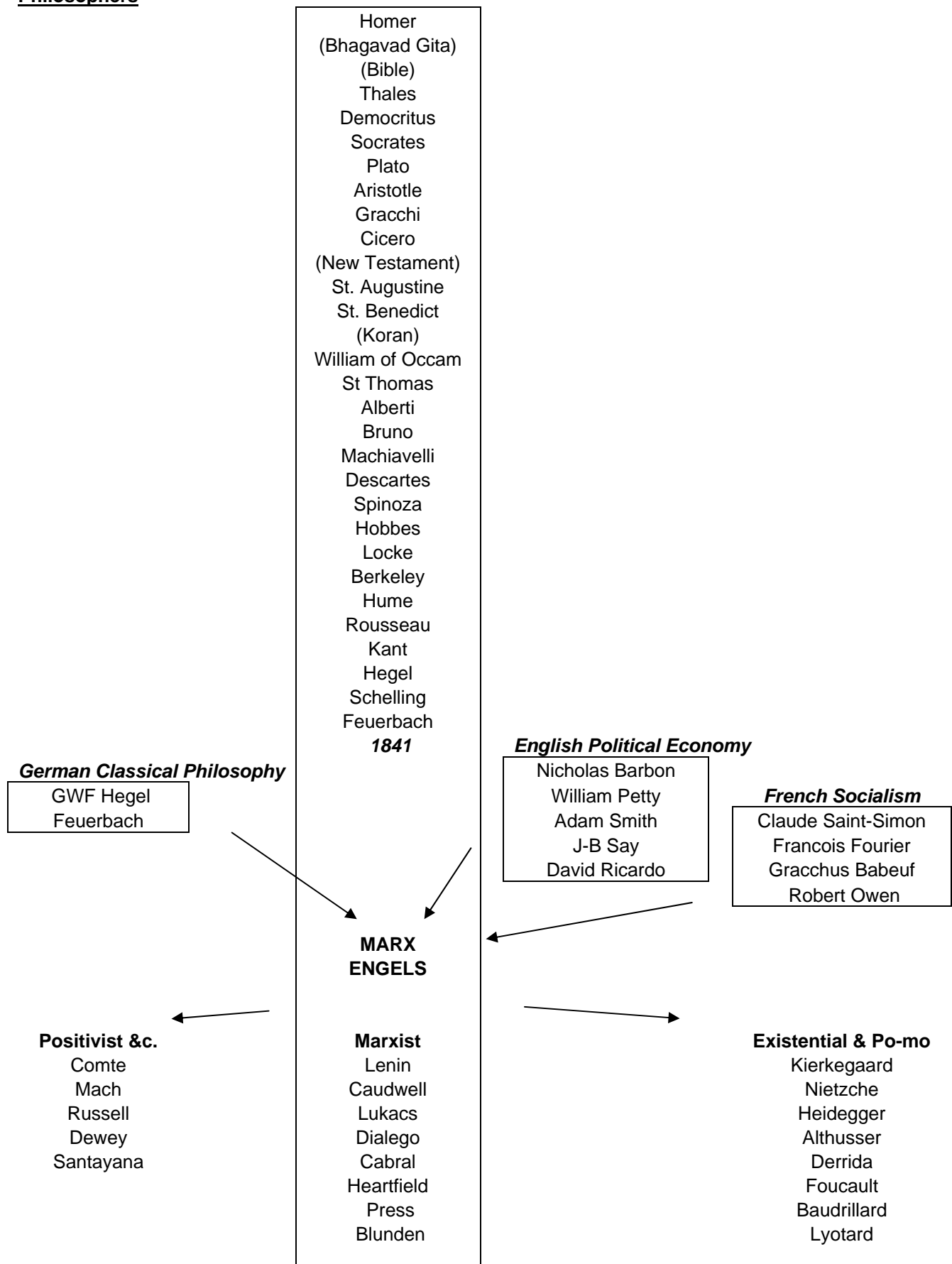
I have taken **Alberti** (1404-1472) as the first representative of modern humanism. He wrote about it very clearly. Alberti is the model of the so-called 'Renaissance Man': one who breaks out of the bonds of feudalism and accepts the responsibility of learning everything and working on everything. This is a necessary break for capitalism to exist, and also for modern democracy to exist.

Spinoza (1632-1677) can represent the rational humanism ('The Enlightenment') that appeared in northern Europe after the Reformation, with the establishment of the first true capitalist state in the Netherlands, where Spinoza lived.

Reactionaries and obscurantists within the bourgeois class soon began to undermine and cover up the message of their own bourgeois-revolutionary philosophers. Bourgeois philosophy declined. In Alberti's time already there was a return to Plato's idealism. **Giordano Bruno** was burnt at the stake in 1600, a martyr for humanism. Galileo Galilei was pressurised and submitted. There was a similar reversal in northern Europe after Spinoza, represented in my listing by Berkeley and Rousseau, who revived idealism and mysticism.

This brings us to **Marx and Engels**, and the three sources and component parts of their philosophical, economic, and political development. In the matter of **philosophy** it is sufficient here to mention **G W F Hegel** and **Ludwig Feuerbach**, because these are the two that are so often mentioned by Marx and Engels themselves. The ancient **dialectical** method developed by Hegel, but with origins in Aristotle's work, was taken on board by Marx and Engels, via Hegel.

Philosophers



Feuerbach published his book *“The Essence of Christianity”* in 1841, the same year that **Friedrich Schelling** was deployed by the Prussian State to dismantle the legacy of Hegel, in a series of public lectures. These and other events marked a break-up of philosophy from that time to now into three distinct lines, as shown.

It appeared to Marx and Engels that they must solve the riddle of **economics**: the “secret of the self-increase of capital”. The study of capitalist economics was relatively young. **Nicholas Barbon** wrote one of the first books on capitalist economics, and Marx mentions him very early in *Capital*, Volume One. **William Petty** is mentioned frequently by Engels. **Adam Smith** was a Scot, who wrote a book called *The Wealth of Nations* in the late eighteenth century, still famous in bourgeois as well as Marxist circles. **David Ricardo** was almost a contemporary of Marx’s, and an exponent of the labour theory of value. **Jean-Baptiste Say** was the author of ‘Say’s Law’, which states that supply creates its own demand. (This is like saying that water flows uphill). Marx read them all, took a certain amount, and added more, to produce the great work *“Capital”*, Volumes 1, 2 and 3.

The question of **socialism** was equally in a state of uproar in Marx’s early years, the 1840s, just like philosophy and economics. The French Revolution had occurred half a century earlier. **Babeuf**, **Saint-Simon**, and **Fourier** were well-known French advocates of socialism. So was the Welshman **Robert Owen**.

Marx and Engels had to take on these socialists. The first major manifestation is *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx’s 1847 polemic against the French petty-bourgeois anarchist **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, followed in the next year (1848) by *The Communist Manifesto*.

Post-modernism directly attacks the rationalist, humanist roots of bourgeois history itself, rubbing everything that modern society stands on. A good rebuttal of post modernism (“Po-Mo”) has been made by **James Heartfield** in *“The Death of the Subject” Explained*.

Revolutionary Marxist Philosophy did not stand still. **Vladimir Lenin**, **Christopher Caudwell**, and **Amilcar Cabral** advanced the cause in the 20th Century. So did the late **Ron Press**, stalwart of the SACP, ANC and SACTU.

Andy Blunden, a friend of the Communist University, continues the tradition today.